



U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

7 Principles for Addressing Encampments

Purpose

This document provides a set of principles to help communities as they develop and implement their response to encampments.

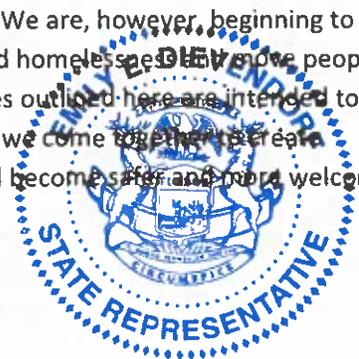
Background

Communities across the United States face a crisis of unsheltered homelessness and encampments. 2020 marked the first time that more individuals experiencing homelessness were unsheltered than sheltered. The COVID-19 public health crisis has only exacerbated this ongoing emergency, with unsheltered people confronted by a global pandemic on top of daily threats to health and safety. These daily threats take the lives of thousands of people experiencing homelessness each year.

Local decision-makers are caught between demands for swift action and the reality that permanent, sustainable solutions—housing with voluntary supportive services—take time and investment to bring to scale. With rising housing costs and limited resources, elected officials, nonprofit providers, businesses, the faith community, advocates, and people with lived experience often struggle to find common ground and effective solutions. Some communities turn to strategies that use aggressive law enforcement approaches that criminalize homelessness, or they close encampments without offering shelter or housing options. These approaches result in adverse health outcomes, exacerbate racial disparities, and create traumatic stress, loss of identification and belongings, and disconnection from much-needed services. While these efforts may have the short-term effect of clearing an encampment from public view, without connection to adequate shelter, housing, and supportive services, they will not succeed. When people's housing and service needs are left unaddressed, encampments may appear again in another neighborhood or even in the same place they had previously been.

Homelessness is a complex social problem with roots in racial inequities. As communities continue to build political and public will and mobilize the resources necessary to provide housing and services to end homelessness, we must acknowledge that homelessness is a failure of systems, not individuals and that we all have a constructive role to play in addressing it. Addressing encampments and ending unsheltered homelessness will require a system-wide, coordinated effort to promote healthy and safe communities where all can live in dignity.

We know that each community is different, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists. We are, however, beginning to see effective practices emerge from communities that successfully address unsheltered homelessness. They move people from encampments into housing and support. Based on these efforts, the principles outlined here are intended to help communities as they develop and implement their responses to encampments. As we come together to create comprehensive, community-wide solutions to encampments, our communities will become safer and more welcoming for all.



- [Sharing the Solutions: Police Partnerships, Homelessness, and Public Health](#) (Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and The Center for Court Innovation)

Principle 2: Engage Encampment Residents to Develop Solutions

Successful strategies rely on connecting early and often with encampment residents and centering their identified needs. Like with all aspects of an effective homelessness response, engaging with encampments should prominently and meaningfully include elevating the lived expertise of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. To the extent possible, encampment residents should take part in discussions and decisions related to their living environments.

Encampment residents may choose to identify an encampment spokesperson or liaison to speak on behalf of the group. When an encampment is going to be closed, ample, visible public notice must be given. Encampment closures should occur only after outreach teams have had time to engage with residents to find alternative shelter, housing, and service options.

Resources:

- [Engaging Individuals With Lived Expertise](#) (HUD)

Principle 3: Conduct Comprehensive and Coordinated Outreach

The most effective outreach responses connect people directly to shelter and housing, mental health and treatment services, and health care. They are part of an overall coordinated homeless response system, linked by sharing data and information, using a coordinated map to identify coverage and or gaps in outreach across the city/county.

Ideally, outreach is not solely focused on encampment removals but occurs regularly and consistently well before an encampment closure. Multidisciplinary outreach teams can help meet many of the immediate needs of encampment residents while providing connections and resources to support successful transitions into housing. These efforts should coordinate with a broader network of programs, services, or staff who are likely to encounter individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. These teams might include peer outreach workers, law enforcement, and other first responders, hospitals, health and behavioral healthcare providers, child welfare agencies, homeless education liaisons, workforce systems, faith-based organizations, and other community-based providers. Approaches that center public health, including deploying alternate response teams, such as mobile crisis teams, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, or Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT teams), are proven outreach models that help build trust and save lives.

Resources such as street medicine and harm reduction strategies can help meet the health needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, especially those with mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders. Outreach and services should be person-centered, trauma-informed, low-barrier, and voluntary.

Additionally, a coordinated neighborhood-by-neighborhood outreach approach in which teams have ample time to build trusting relationships in specific geographic areas can result in higher acceptance rates for housing, shelter, and services and stronger communication and support from neighbors and businesses.

much individual choice as possible, including trauma-informed services and other models based on principles of harm reduction, which keep people alive and create pathways to mental health care, substance use treatment, and housing.

Providing interim solutions should not come at the expense of a community's commitment to developing permanent housing and service solutions but should instead be viewed as a necessary emergency response to the crisis of encampments.

Resources:

- [Caution is Needed When Considering “Sanctioned Encampments” or “Safe Zones” \(USICH\)](#)
- [Model Transitions from Non-Congregate Shelter: Joint Recommendations for Assisting People Experiencing Homelessness \(FEMA and HUD\)](#)
- [Exploring Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments and Associated Cost: City Approaches to Encampments and What They Cost \(HUD and HHS\)](#)

Principle 6: Develop Pathways to Permanent Housing and Supports

To end homelessness for everyone, we must link people experiencing unsheltered homelessness with permanent housing opportunities with the right level of services to ensure that those housing opportunities are stable and successful. When adequate housing options and voluntary wraparound supports are readily available, Housing First strategies have been shown to be effective in ending homelessness for people with complex medical, mental health, and substance use issues. However, the challenge remains that many communities do not have access to enough units or supportive services to scale up this approach. Cities, counties, and states must coordinate their efforts to mobilize available resources—including significant funding from the American Rescue Plan—to move people as quickly as possible from homelessness into housing. Close coordination with their local CoC's Coordinated Entry System (CES) is also important to determine how people in encampments will be prioritized for housing and services.

Whether directly from unsheltered homelessness into permanent housing with supports or through the interim step of dignified shelter, our efforts to address encampments must be focused on providing access to both housing and services to help people stabilize and reconnect with friends and family, and the community.

Resources:

- [Case Studies: Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments \(USICH\)](#)
- [Planning a Housing Surge to Accelerate Rehousing Efforts in Response to COVID-19 \(HUD\)](#)
- [Housing Surges—Special Considerations for Targeting People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness \(HUD\)](#)

Principle 7: Create a Plan for What Will Happen to Encampment Sites After Closure

Some encampments are in places that are not safe. Encampments located in medians near highways and in spaces that have been identified as hazardous waste sites are not safe, and communities should take measures to secure those locations to keep encampments from returning.

For encampments in public spaces like parks, communities should engage neighborhoods, the faith, business communities, and formerly homeless individuals to reimagine and invest in these public spaces so that all residents can



Coexistence in Public Space

Engagement tools for creating shared spaces in places with homelessness



SPUR

Gehl

spur.org/coexistence

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belonging within a shared space while feeling safe and secure. SPUR and Gehl created the Coexistence Toolkit, a set of public engagement exercises for city agencies, nonprofit organizations and other park stewards to use in public meetings and events that inform public space projects, master planning efforts and visioning sessions. This report introduces the toolkit, which can be downloaded at spur.org/coexistence, and offers considerations for community discussion. We used Guadalupe River Park as a case study for testing these ideas, but we maintained flexibility in developing the exercises so that other cities and communities could tailor them to respond to their own needs and challenges.

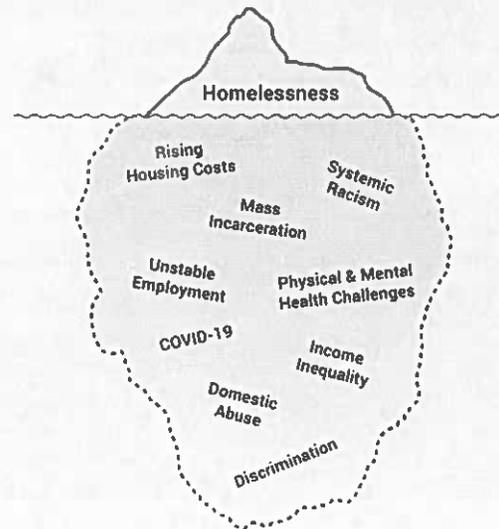
We hope this research provides the foundation for a new way of thinking about park equity and helps facilitate a new way of holding conversations about access, safety and design within shared public space.

The Systemic Causes of Homelessness

It's important to note that the Coexistence Toolkit is an effort to address the *symptoms* of homelessness; it does not address its systemic causes. This report focuses on how to protect and manage equal access to public space in the current reality, where homelessness exists. However, it should not be taken as a sign of complacency or resignation regarding homelessness in our communities. The Bay Area must continue working to end homelessness by addressing its root causes. SPUR's housing and economic justice policy programs target these structural forces.

The underlying forces that cause homelessness are deeply rooted in housing, economic and racial inequity. For San José, one of the largest contributing factors leading to homelessness is income inequality and the growing wealth gap. San José ranked sixth in the nation in terms of income inequality according to a 2018 Brookings Institution report.¹¹ The city's highest earners make 10.5 times more than its lowest earners. Between 2014 and 2016, salaries of high earners increased by more than \$60,000 while salaries of low earners increased less than \$2,000. Until we as a society address these larger issues, we will not be able to properly address or solve our homelessness crisis.

Homelessness is just the tip of the iceberg — a symptom of broader economic and social forces and experiences.



spaces are natural areas that lack opportunities for activity and recreation.

In spite of the park's current challenges, the space is a popular destination for runners, cyclists and families who find joy stumbling upon its hidden gems, like beautiful murals or native birds resting in the trees.

The park also skirts the edge of some of the largest planned developments San José has seen in more than a decade, including Downtown West, Google's proposed mixed-use campus, and the expansion of Diridon Station, which will make it the biggest transportation hub west of the Mississippi River. When these developments are completed, the river park will serve as a necessary green space for thousands of new residents and workers.

Understanding the trends and forces at play, SPUR focused its research on three main objectives:

- Balancing natural ecology with a rapidly growing urban environment
- Measuring and communicating the economic benefits of an enhanced Guadalupe River Park
- Demonstrating that public space is a driver for creating more engaged, equitable and sustainable communities

Throughout the early stages of our research, including more than 50 interviews and meetings with residents, nonprofit groups, developers and service providers, we learned that two of the major tensions playing out in the park — ones that would impact all of our research efforts — were safety and maintenance. When we began to unpack what "safety" meant to the interviewees, we found that it was largely connected with people's perceptions of and experiences with unhoused residents living in and using the park. Other safety concerns included poor lighting, low visibility and fragmentation of the trail, but often we heard that the park would never be an inviting and active place unless its managers reduced the presence of unhoused people and homeless encampments. This is further supported by annual surveys conducted by the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy. In a 2019 survey, only 23% of respondents felt welcome and safe using the park trail, and 43% cited concerns regarding unhoused people in the open-ended response section of the survey.

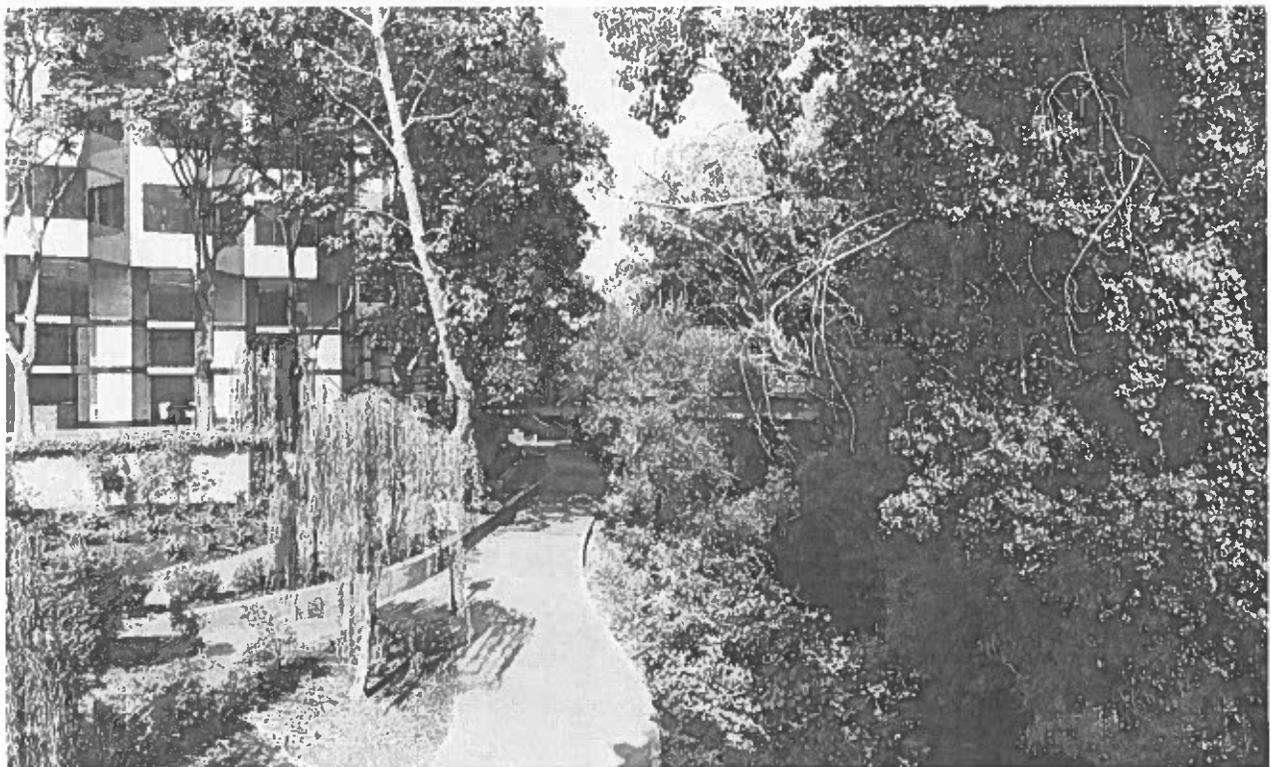


Photo by Kara Brodgesell

Safety and perceptions of people experiencing homelessness are not concerns restricted to Guadalupe River Park or San José. The National Recreation and Parks Association has identified addressing homelessness in public space as a key priority.⁴ Through community interviews, the parks association found that what often upset housed park users and drove them to voice concern to park management was not interactions with unhoused park users but rather symptoms of homelessness, such as trash and encampments. Complaints included requests to remove public restrooms, benches and overgrown vegetation, which some visitors felt attracted people experiencing homelessness. The parks association also indicated that, given the diversity and complexity of park uses, park managers are now having to do jobs they are not prepared for. Park staff are not just public space stewards and environmental educators but social workers, mental health counselors and much more. Parks and recreation agencies must now balance providing services and resources for unhoused people with enforcing park rules and maintenance standards.⁵

Trash and debris throughout the park and especially along riverbanks has led to increased water toxicity and pollution.



A man bathes in the Guadalupe River.



Photos by Kara Brodgesell

Public Space Management: Libraries and Homelessness

The need for public space managers to provide services for vulnerable populations is impacting libraries as well as parks. Libraries across the country from San Francisco, California, to Columbia, South Carolina, now employ social service workers to staff local library branches. These professionals offer medical aid and answer questions such as where to access food-assistance services or sign up for health care. Public libraries have also become de facto shelters for unhoused residents, offering warmth, free bathrooms, stable Wi-Fi connections and a safe place to stay during the day. Most often the conversation around safety in public spaces is about supporting and responding to housed users. Too often we forget that people experiencing homelessness are extremely vulnerable. The National Coalition for the Homeless reported 112 documented attacks against individuals experiencing homelessness in 2016 and 2017, with 33% of those reported attacks taking place in California.⁷

It's important to note that the river park is not a safe place for people to live long term. In the last few years, fires have broken out in undeveloped areas of the park, and several people have drowned in the river. While homelessness is a current condition that park managers must work with, the city, county, state and other policymakers must continue addressing the housing shortage, income inequality and other structural causes of homelessness.

Recognizing the importance of Guadalupe River Park and its current and future impact on the city, we determined that the community needed a way to come together and unpack the relationship between homelessness and public space. If public spaces are indeed open and accessible for all, then how can San Joséans start to think about what coexistence looks like? Could the community determine and agree upon appropriate behaviors in public spaces? And could it enable a park management body to uphold that social contract in a reimagined Guadalupe River Park?

Enforcing Behaviors Equitably

For true coexistence in public spaces, it's critical to manage and enforce acceptable behaviors equitably. It's important to remember that negative behaviors should not be solely attributed to unhoused people. For example, many agree that hearing someone yelling loudly at another person is not comfortable. This behavior is often associated with people experiencing homelessness but can also be observed in housed people stumbling home from a concert, sporting event or other evening activity. In the latter case, enforcement might mean calling the park ranger or police. But the former situation could be better addressed by a social worker equipped to handle mental health issues. While we might respond to the challenge differently depending on the underlying cause, we must hold all people accountable for their behavior regardless of their economic background or race.

In Seattle, a temporary “living room” parklet helped foster conversation and empathy between housed and unhoused community members.



Dialogue

The engagement processes that connect users

Each of the four facets that support coexistence in public space requires in-depth community dialogue. In order to determine what type of design or program best serves a particular park, community members, park stewards, homeless advocates and government officials need to come together to understand each other’s concerns and share ideas. The engagement process connects users and allows them to collectively shape the place and sustain its maintenance over time.

In one example of dialogue on these issues, two Seattle designers collaborated to create temporary “living room” parklets in a bustling neighborhood near a homeless services center. For people experiencing homelessness, the parklet’s offering of free food, magazines, games and music made for a lively neighborhood amenity. For passersby, the parklet became a thought-provoking conversation starter, building empathy about the experience of being homeless in the city. This pilot design created a space that not only provided needed resources for those experiencing homelessness but allowed people who live both inside and outside to connect and get to know each other.

Place stewards from Urban Alchemy assist a neighbor in San Francisco's Tenderloin District.



Operations and Maintenance

The cleaning, oversight and upkeep of a place

Cities are often really good at finding the capital to build new parks and public spaces and not as successful in securing the ongoing funds needed to maintain and operate them. But cleaning, oversight and upkeep are just as important as the initial investment. Operations and maintenance include repairs, landscaping, cleaning and waste management, which may be carried out by public works or parks departments, volunteer groups, nonprofit agencies or business associations. Especially in urban areas, where high traffic and large gatherings can cause greater wear and tear, the need for a sufficient operations and maintenance budget is critical to the success of a public space.

In San Francisco, an organization called Urban Alchemy employs people who were once unhoused, formerly incarcerated people and others who face significant barriers to employment as place stewards. In partnership with the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Urban Alchemy has deployed staff in Civic Center Commons since 2016. Drawing from their own experiences, park stewards are able to balance empathy for people experiencing homelessness with a firm approach to setting behavioral norms and ensuring safe and responsive public space.

Photo by Lou Hammonds, Urban Alchemy

The City of Atlanta hires social workers to staff Woodruff Park. They help connect unhoused people to

social services and operate a game cart where anyone can borrow board games for free.



park bench may be categorized as hanging out, whereas a similar group of Black teens is more likely to be called out for loitering. Pervasive racial stereotypes that cast Black men as dangerous and suspicious unfold often in public space. This was made clear in New York's Central Park in May 2020, when a white woman, Amy Cooper, called the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was an avid park user and bird-watcher, simply for telling her to keep her dog on a leash. In a time of increased concern over safety in the public realm, law enforcement is not always the best method for safeguarding rights and norms. We need to reimagine how we manage and hold people accountable for certain behaviors in a space.

HOPE Atlanta, a nonprofit addressing homelessness, has formed a unique partnership with the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, which manages Woodruff Park. The partnership created a position for a dedicated social worker in the park in an effort to build relationships with unhoused people and connect them to more stable housing options and other services. Since creating this role in 2018, the partnership has placed 135 people in permanent housing and connected more than 1,000 others to social services.⁹

Existing rules such as loitering laws or restrictions on unpermitted vending also deserve reconsideration. Before rules are established, a community should come to a collective understanding of the behaviors and conditions that make people feel uncomfortable in public space. Together, the group can determine what it is about vending or loitering that challenges perceptions of comfort and safety or violates the social contract. Once there is a shared understanding, the community can begin to examine the rules that need to be in place and the staffing necessary to ensure that they are being met.

It's also important to separate people from behaviors. By identifying and defining off-limits behaviors and conditions, communities can design standards and rules to tie accountability to behaviors, not to stereotypes

CHAPTER 3

How to Use the Coexistence Toolkit

Our team developed three exercises that public space stewards can use to gather public input into design, policy and program decisions. The Coexistence Toolkit was developed with the underlying principle that **all people, whether they have a permanent home or not, have a right to access and participate in public space**. When testing and refining these exercises, our team worked with a cross-sector advisory committee representing homeless service agencies, environmentalists, city government and the downtown San José business improvement district. The exercises were also tested on locations in Guadalupe River Park, although as of publication, no government agency or nonprofit organization had used them in an official capacity to gather data.

These exercises can help guide a community through a practice of better understanding how to create just, welcoming and healthy spaces where all kinds of people can coexist. We also want to explore what shapes coexistence in public places — and identify core challenges — so communities can better share space. The toolkit is designed to be used at the community level, in public meetings and at events that inform public space projects, master planning efforts and visioning sessions. It includes a slide presentation and worksheets (see spur.org/coexistence) and is designed for a group led by a facilitator. We recommend that city agencies, nonprofit organizations and other park stewards conduct these exercises at the beginning of a community process to help ground future conversations in shared values and understanding.

Exercise No. 1: Determining Shared Values

The first exercise is a two-part activity to determine the values that people hold for public space and better understand their level of support for each value set. This exercise is particularly useful if people disagree about what priorities should govern a public space. These exercises were designed in partnership with our advisory committee, which included people working directly with Guadalupe River Park as well as public space practitioners from across the country. While other exercises in the toolkit can be adapted for specific spaces, these five values should remain consistent regardless of the public space. (See the list of values on page 20.) When leading this activity, the facilitator shows the group the five values one at a time and asks participants to agree or disagree. Setting and agreeing to a set of values is extremely important on the road to achieving safe coexistence in public space. As much as the exercises are designed to offer potential ideas for solutions, this activity also aims to spark a new way of thinking and viewing the built environment. In addition, it helps to uncouple specific behaviors from one population group and show that all users and visitors of a space need to agree with and uphold these principles.

After participants have responded to each of the values, the facilitator can move the group into a full discussion using the second values worksheet (see page 20).

This allows people to share which value resonated most, as well as the challenges they found. This time of reflection presents an opportunity for the group to determine a sixth value statement that might be unique to the place they are considering. This exercise provides the baseline to move into the next two activities.

Exercise No. 2: Determining Acceptable Behaviors

Having a social contract in place helps ensure that the values determined in the first exercise are upheld. For example, value two states that public space should be accessible, safe, delightful and welcoming for all, without privileging one person or group over another.

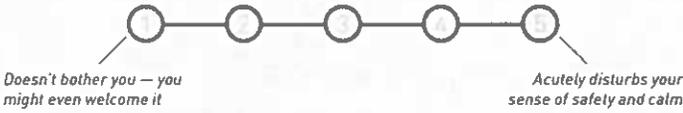
Defining a spectrum of acceptable behaviors is a fundamental component of the social contract. These behaviors need to uphold the aforementioned values. The second exercise asks, "How do different behaviors in public space make us feel?"

Our team started by comparing three sets of public space rules to gauge what types of behaviors are off-limits. We examined rules set by the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development (which manages the city's Civic Center spaces), San Francisco Public Library and San José Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services. Between these three agencies, there were 80 behaviors and conditions.

<p>How does seeing these behaviors make you feel?</p> <p>Rate on the scale provided, using the instructions on the back.</p>	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Damaging property [e.g., turning a trashcan over]</p> 	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Lighting fires</p> 	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Illegal fishing</p> 
<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Dumping waste in the river / land</p> 	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Misusing restrooms [e.g., for drugs, lewd activities]</p> 	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Informal vending</p> 	<p>PROPERTY & LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Residing in public space [e.g., vehicles, tent, encampment of 6+ tents]</p> 

Didn't find what you were looking for?

Write in behaviors and conditions you might see in public space. For the behaviors and conditions on the previous side, and any you add, rate how each behavior or condition makes you feel on the spectrum below:



			
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This is a productive way to begin discussing how to manage certain aspects of a public space. It allows room for creative ideas and new models for delivering on the vision and values set for a space. This is also where the community can start to uncover policies that need to be changed or created, as well as potential funding needs. For instance, if consensus emerges that hiring social service workers to conduct outreach within the park would improve conditions for all users, community members might be motivated to advocate for a new policy and budget allocation.

In conjunction, these three tools create a road map for identifying important resources, such as new investment to hire social service workers or policy changes to increase dedicated maintenance and trash cleanup.

Coexistence in Your Place

—
Share how you account for each facet of coexistence in your public space (e.g., roles, protocols, etc.)



Who is responsible for Spatial Design & Environment?

[Your response here]



Who is responsible for Operations & Maintenance?

[Your response here]



Who is responsible for Program & Activation?

[Your response here]



Who is responsible for Rights, Rules & Accountability?

[Your response here]



Who is responsible for Dialogue?

[Your response here]

Endnotes

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- 2 Diana Budds, "How Urban Design Perpetuates Racial Inequality – And What We Can Do About It," Fast Company, July 18, 2016, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3061873/how-urban-design-perpetuates-racial-inequality-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>
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- 6 City of San José, Homeless Census & Survey, 2019, page 10, <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showdocument?id=38890>
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